

NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY

NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

**ASYMMETRIC WARFARE:
THE ONLY THING NEW IS THE TACTICS**

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Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE 2000		2. REPORT TYPE N/A		3. DATES COVERED -	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Asymmetric Warfare: The Only Thing New is the Tactics				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) National Defense University National War College Washington, DC				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release, distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT UU	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 16	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

In On War, Carl von Clausewitz states, “Every age has its own kind of war, its own limiting conditions, and its own peculiar preconceptions.”¹ Many studies, panels and reviews have been conducted in the last decade that identify threats to United States’ survival and vital interests and the changing security environment. Most studies agree that the United States will not face a single peer competitor in conventional military terms in the next decade or two. They also agree that the lack of a peer competitor does not mean that the United States cannot be and will not be threatened. Many studies conclude that prudent adversaries, competitors and enemies will avoid our conventional military strength, but may seek to do us harm by identifying and exploiting our weaknesses. Attacking our vulnerabilities has been dubbed asymmetric warfare. Some would imply that this is a new way of war. In fact it is not. Exploiting an adversary’s vulnerabilities has been an objective of military and political leaders for centuries. Adversaries that we may face in the future will use asymmetric tactics in order to have a military or psychological effect on the United States. Although we may not be able to completely deter the use of these tactics we can defend against them and mitigate their effects thereby ensuring continued protection of our vital national interests.

This paper will show that asymmetric warfare is not new. What is new is the fact that technology provides an adversary the ability to strike at the United States itself. We are no longer invulnerable to attack on our shores. A review of military theory will show that changing the character and conduct of warfare does

¹ Carl von Clausewitz, On War, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976) as quoted in National Defense University, National War College Core Course 5605

not change its nature. It will show how concern over asymmetric tactics has been addressed from the National Security Strategy through joint doctrine, and it will address how our national and military strategy is countering these tactics as they are identified. It will also indicate areas where greater emphasis needs to be placed and identify areas where risk or threats may exist that may not have been addressed.

We hear about asymmetric warfare, asymmetric threats, asymmetric challenges and asymmetric approaches. These terms seem to be used interchangeably. Webster's New International Dictionary defines symmetry as, "...due or balanced proportions." It merely defines asymmetric as, "not symmetric."² Joint doctrine is not more specific. Joint Pub 1, Joint Warfare of the Armed Forces of the United States illustrates how the entire character and conduct of war has become asymmetric. It describes "symmetric engagements [as] battles between similar forces where superior correlation of forces and technological advantage are important to ensure victory and minimize losses. . . . Asymmetric engagements are battles between dissimilar forces."³ Examples given for symmetric engagements are land versus land, sea versus sea or air versus air engagements. The examples of Meuse-Argonne and the Battle of Jutland in World War I are ancient in terms of technological advances since that war. Even the air-to-air symmetric example, the Battle of Britain, fails to acknowledge the asymmetric advantage that new radar technology provided to

Syllabus "U.S. Military Strategy and Joint Operations," Academic Year 1999-2000 (Spring), pg. 17.

² Webster's New International Dictionary, 2d ed., s.v. "symmetry" and "asymmetric."

³ U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Pub 1, "Joint Warfare of the Armed Forces of the United States," 10 January 1995, page IV-10.

Britain and the negative effects of Hitler's decision to shift the German effort from the Royal Air Force to England's cities. Arguably, attacking the British will and morale was an asymmetric tactic that failed. Joint Pub 1 emphasizes that asymmetric, "... engagements can be extremely lethal, especially if the force being attacked is not ready to defend itself against the threat."⁴ What becomes apparent is that the entire concept of joint operations is intended to pursue asymmetric operations that render an opponent powerless to defend himself. "As we consider the nature of warfare in the modern era, we find that it is synonymous with joint warfare."⁵ Joint warfare is synonymous with asymmetric tactics. Successful commanders, given the option, will always attack an adversaries vulnerabilities and weaknesses either by identifying the specific weakness to be exploited, or by creating one by developing and implementing asymmetric tactics. Recent experience during Operation Allied Force proves that asymmetric tactics will be incorporated at the operational and tactical levels of future conflict. Slobodan Milosevic tried to counter NATO military superiority using asymmetric tactics. "These tactics created serious challenges for our forces, all of which we were able to overcome thanks to excellent training, leadership, equipment and motivation."⁶

⁴ Ibid., IV-10

⁵ Ibid., I-1

⁶ U.S. Department of Defense, Report to Congress, "Kosovo/Operation Allied Force After-Action Report, 31 January, 2000, pg. 6.

ASYMMETRIC TACTICS AND MILITARY THEORY

In The Art Of War, Sun Tzu states that, “what is of supreme importance in war is to attack the enemy’s strategy.”⁷ His focus was not purely on defeating the enemy army, but on defeating the enemy’s plan. Defeating the enemy’s army was of lower precedence than disrupting his alliances that were key to his plan. Clearly Sun Tzu appreciated the need to weaken an adversary through many approaches designed to affect his ability and willingness to wage war. He does not advocate a symmetric approach to war where one attacks an adversary’s army with an equal force, but he advocates a strategy that employs the *cheng* (orthodox) force and the *ch’i* (unorthodox) force. Sun Tzu dedicates an entire section of his work to “Weaknesses and Strengths”. “To be certain to take what you attack is to attack a place the enemy does not protect. To be certain to hold what you defend is to defend a place the enemy does not attack.”⁸ He frequently refers to knowing your enemy and yourself and to shaping the enemy while avoiding allowing him to shape you. This is very similar to dominant battlespace awareness as articulated in Joint Vision 2010 and other joint publications. Sun Tzu refers to direct and indirect approaches to warfare. Indirect approaches are asymmetric. It is the ability to adapt to an adversary’s tactics and doctrine by either developing new tactics and doctrine of your own or by employing new technology in such a way as to overcome an adversaries strength. “Thus, one able to gain the victory by modifying his tactics in

⁷ Sun Tzu, The Art of War, trans. Samuel B. Griffith (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971, pg 77.

⁸ Ibid., pg. 96.

accordance with the enemy situation may be said to be divine.”⁹ In his introduction to The Art of War, Samuel B. Griffith states, “one of the most difficult problems which confronts any commander who has committed his forces in accordance with a well developed plan is to alter this in the light of changing circumstances.”¹⁰ Sun Tzu also cautioned that even as new indirect asymmetric tactics are employed, success might be short lived as an adversary learns and adapts to the new character and conduct of warfare.

Carl von Clausewitz defined war as, “...an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will.”¹¹ Although there is not a peer competitor to the United States on the horizon, Clausewitz acknowledged that a nation might be forced to fight even when its military is numerically and technologically inferior to its foe. Clausewitz recognized that war might be unavoidable even though a nation may not fight it from a position of superiority. He wrote that, “where the weaker side is forced to fight against odds, its lack of numbers must be made up by the inner tension and vigor that are inspired by danger....If an increase in vigor is combined with wise limitations in objectives, the result is that combination of brilliant strokes and cautious restraint that we admire...”¹² An adversary to the United States may not need to win a military conflict, but may only have to prevent the United States from winning. To prevent the U.S. from winning, an adversary may merely have to attack our strategy as identified earlier by Sun Tzu.

⁹ Ibid., pg. 101.

¹⁰ Ibid., pg 52.

¹¹ Carl von Clausewitz, On War, ed. And trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976) pg. 75.

Clausewitz also identified lines of communication as something a military had to protect especially as these lines proceed into enemy territory. The United States reliance on sea, air and electronic lines of communication is significant. Today's technology makes those lines vulnerable well beyond the physical borders of an adversary. How we fight is driven by our ability to establish and secure lines of communication that we are completely dependent upon, which if severed or degraded can severely affect our strategy. "Thus, the position of lines of communication and, hence, the route an invading army can use are matters of free choice only up to a certain point: their exact location is determined by the facts of geography."

Possibly one of the most pertinent points raised by Clausewitz pertaining to asymmetric tactics is that "...it is the natural law of the moral world that a nation that finds itself on the brink of an abyss will try to save itself by any means."¹³ Asymmetric employment of weapons of mass destruction or information warfare may be the only means an adversary to the United States has to bring the war to the American homeland.

B.H. Liddell Hart wrote of the utility of indirect approaches to warfare. In his preface to Strategy he argues that the development of nuclear weapons has increased the use of indirect approaches and, rather than eliminating or deterring war, has created an environment where all wars will be limited. "Ironically, the further we have developed the "massive" effect of the bombing weapon, the more

¹² Ibid., pg 346.

¹³ Ibid., pg. 483.

we have helped the progress of the new guerrilla-type strategy.”¹⁴ In these limited wars adversaries would use asymmetric tactics, “...not so much to seek battle as to seek a strategic situation so advantageous that if it does not of itself produce the decision, its continuation by a battle is sure to achieve this.”¹⁵ The focus was on physical and psychological dislocation of the adversary by impacting his plan. This approach is particularly effective against an adversary that relies on a single inflexible plan. This adversary is unprepared to consider alternatives courses of action to be executed when forced to deviate from the original plan.

ASYMMETRIC CHALLENGES IN THE FUTURE SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

As stated earlier, much has been written about the future use of asymmetric tactics directed against United States forces, United States citizens or the United States itself. The vast majority of Americans have not felt threatened at home since World War II. Concern about a Japanese invasion of the west coast, and the constant presence of German U-boats off the Atlantic coast were minimal threats to the existence of the United States and the well being of a vast majority of its citizens.

During the Vietnam War North Vietnamese involvement with American anti-war groups brought the war onto U.S. soil, but most Americans failed to

¹⁴ B.H. Liddell Hart, Strategy, 2nd rev.ed. (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1991) pg. xix.

¹⁵ Ibid., pg. 324.

realize it. In 1967, Hanson W. Baldwin, military editor for *U.S. News & World Report*, wrote that the main battleground would become the United States.

“Intelligence appreciations are unanimous on one point, that the current winter-spring offensive...is keyed primarily to strengthening opposition to the war...and influencing American and world public opinion during a presidential election year.”¹⁶ The full impact of North Vietnamese efforts on the anti-war effort and on the outcome of the war can be debated. It is clear that they used asymmetric tactics to influence and effect American will and resolve to fight the war, and future adversaries perceive that this is a tactic that might be successfully employed against the United States.

What is new in today’s environment is not that warfare is fought asymmetrically, but that an adversary has a greater ability to strike at the United States itself. The last several years have seen many studies and panels that reviewed both the national security and national military strategies in the context of the changing international environment. Although our National Security Strategy does not specifically use the term asymmetric threat or tactics it does state that, “potential enemies, whether nations, terrorist groups or criminal organizations, are increasingly likely to attack U.S. territory and the American people in unconventional ways.”¹⁷ Our National Military Strategy specifically addresses “Asymmetric Challenges.” It describes these challenges as, “means

¹⁶ Hanson W. Baldwin, “Vietnam Report: foe Seeks To Sway U.S. Public.” *U.S. News and World Report*, 25 December 1967. Quoted in William M. Hammond, The U.S. Army in Vietnam series. Public Affairs: The Military and Media 1962-1968. (Washington, D.C.: Center for Military History, United States Army, 1990) pg. 339-340.

¹⁷ *A National Security Strategy for a New Century* (Washington, D.C.: The White House, October 1998) pg. 7.

[that] include unconventional or inexpensive approaches that circumvent our strengths, exploit our vulnerabilities or confront us in ways we cannot match in kind.”¹⁸ Both documents refer to terrorism, weapons of mass destruction and infrastructure attack.

Current U.S. joint doctrine and Joint Vision 2010 address the use of asymmetric tactics by adversaries. These tactics are included in two major themes from The United States Commission on National Security/21st Century report:

1. America will become increasingly vulnerable to hostile attack on our homeland and our military superiority will not entirely protect us.
2. Rapid advances in information and biotechnologies will create new vulnerabilities for U.S. security.¹⁹

A study conducted by the Science Applications International Corporation at the request of the Office of the Secretary of Defense (Net Assessment) specifically analyzed how different countries were developing asymmetric responses to the United States’ military dominance and use of technology. The study used a definition of asymmetric that is most useful. The study considered the use of technology, doctrine and tactics, “that are designed not to emulate a comprehensive spectrum of RMA capabilities, but to deter, if not defeat the

¹⁸ *National Military Strategy* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, September 1997) pg. 9.

¹⁹ U.S. Commission on National Security/21st Century, “New World Coming: American Security in the 21st Century, The Phase I Report on the Emerging Global Security Environment for the First Quarter of the 21st Century”, September 15, 1999, pg. 138.

enemy's perceived superiority by using a different balance of forces and a dissimilar operational construct."²⁰

Another way an adversary may employ asymmetric tactics is by attacking our value systems or using our laws against us. An adversary not only may use technology in a different way than we do, but they will likely think differently than we do. "[e]ach civilization has its own notion of war which cannot help but be influenced by its cultural background."²¹ We are not only dealing with technological advances and how they can be employed asymmetrically to counter our strength, but we are facing cultural and societal differences that make it harder for us to prepare to defend or respond against these types of tactics.

Liddell Hart wrote that the advent of nuclear weapons did not make war any less likely. Our technological and military superiority also do not make war any less likely. Our superiority only ensures that our adversaries will seek other means to attack or counter our strength in the event we attack them.

DEFENDING AGAINST ASYMMETRIC TACTICS

Adversaries will seek asymmetric means to gain an advantage, but that does not mean we are powerless to act. In addition to the several studies that

²⁰ Foreign Systems Research Center, A Division of Science Applications International Corporation, "Global Perspectives on the Revolution in Military Affairs: Selected Asymmetric Responses," Washington, D.C.: Prepared for the U.S. Department of Defense, 13 November 1998, pg. 2.

²¹ Colonel Charles J. Dunlap, Jr., USAF, "Asymmetrical Warfare and the Western Mindset," 9 Presented to The Role of Naval Forces in the 21 Century Operations Conference, Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University, et al. Cambridge MA, 20 November 1997) pg. 3, quoting Lieutenant

address the changing national security environment there have been many decisions by the National Command Authority, the Department of Defense and the Joint Chiefs of Staff to deter and counter these threats. The biggest challenge will be to coordinate efforts that cross federal, state and departmental boundaries.

Several Presidential Decision Directives (PDD) have been issued which address some of these challenges. PDDs 62 and 63 address combating terrorism, in particular terrorist use of WMD, and protecting our nations critical infrastructure respectively. The Federal Emergency Management Agency's Federal Response Plan dictates federal response to national disasters. The Unified Command Plan 99 redesignated ACOM as the U.S. Joint Forces Command (JFCOM). One of its missions is, "planning for the defense of CONUS, domestic support operations to assist government agencies, and the binational Canada-United States land and maritime defense of the Canada-United States Region."²² Joint Publication 3-08, "Interagency Coordination During Joint Operations," addresses how the military will function in a complex interagency environment.

Each of these documents is an effort to address the challenge of dealing with asymmetric tactics, especially those directed against the continental United States. Much of the guidance for implementing PDDs 62 and 63 comes from the National Security Council. FEMA is clearly in charge of coordinating disaster

General Li Jijuan, "Traditional Military Thinking and the Defensive Strategy of China", (LeTort Paper No.1, U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute (Earl Tilford, ed., August 29, 1997)), pg. 1.

²² U.S. Department of Defense, *Unified Command Plan*, 29 September 1999, (Washington, D.C., 29 September 1999)

relief, but relies a great deal on other agencies. Joint doctrine for homeland defense has not been written even though JFCOM has stood up a Joint Task Force for Homeland Defense. We have taken the lessons learned from major national disasters, domestic and international terrorism and widespread computer hacker attacks on government and commercial computer networks and systems and developed responses to each event. The problem is that there is no overarching policy or plan to integrate the disparate activities of multiple agencies to deal with a large scale physical or cyber attack on the United States by an adversary whether they employ asymmetric or symmetric tactics.

Our adversaries will use asymmetric tactics. The nature of the conflict will determine what tactics will be used. We have shown that we can counter these tactics at the tactical and operational level. We are not as prepared at the strategic level of war. The intelligence community will be challenged to determine capabilities and intent. We are developing concepts and plans for dealing with a large-scale attack, but there is much work to be done. This process must be exercised and refined before an attack. Legislation may be necessary to ensure law enforcement and intelligence agencies will be able to collect on and investigate potential adversaries. "Traditional distinctions between national defense and domestic security will be challenged further as the new century unfolds, and both conventional policies and bureaucratic arrangements

will be stretched to and beyond the breaking point unless those policies and arrangements are reformed.”²³

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